Religion and Conflict
Matthew 2:16-23
January 18, 1970
John M. Buchanan

The principals of the story are easy enough to catalog. Several astronomers from Babylon who had been observing a star for two years: Herod the Great, King of the Jews by an act of the Roman Senate in 40 B.C., a brutal man who murdered many people including several relatives and his own son, a very efficient, "law and order" type, about whom Augustus the Emperor once said he would rather be Herod's pig than his son.

Bethlehem, birth place of the beloved King David, and thus as significant for the patriotic Jew as Mount Vernon or Valley Forge for us. Egypt, land of mystery land of captivity out of which God brought his chosen people centuries before; geographically not far from the small town of Bethlehem.

Mary, Joseph and their new son whom they called Jesus, a son whose birth precipitated some very strange events involving shepherds, magi and the rhetoric of peace, hope and love.

It's interesting that nowhere else in the New Testament is this bizarre affair mentioned. In fact, it will be found nowhere in the preserved, historical records of the era. Josephus, the scholar, upon whose records we depend for insight into the times, doesn't mention it. And secular historians have always pointed out that had Herod done something so horrendous as slaughtering all male children in Bethlehem under the age of two it certainly would have been recorded somewhere. Maybe so, but maybenot. It was not an uncharacteristic thing for Herod to do; he did other things equally as horrible: we don't know how many boy babies were in Bethlehem at the time - 500, 100, 50, 25. And so perhaps it did happen. Speculation of course, on both sides. But there it is; part of Matthew's account of the Birth: part, really, of the Christmas drama. Although we have never seen it celebrated on Christmas cards. There it is - important because it is there: important because it tells of two perplexing phenomena. Life is a difficult paradox: that which is good comes out evil sometimes: life is a complex of conflicts - people get hurt when they are caught in the middle, mostly children, of course. Little

German children in Dresden, Japanese children in Nagasaki and Hiroshima, Vietnamese babies in My Lai, American children in Chicago and Lafayette and Natchez, Mississippi. Nobody set out to hurt them - but it happened and happens. Conflict. The Gospel of Jesus Christ in the world. And people get hurt in many ways.

The other phenomena is the existence of evil itself. Why do things like this happen? We've asked that question - and we must ask it again if we read a story about a child's birth, the first visible result of which was the slaughter of a lot of other children who were guilty only of being born in Bethlehem.

W. H. Auden, one of the truly great poets of the English language has captured the tragedy and ambiguity of this affair and life in general in his "Christmas Oratoria". Herod is bewildered - Herod must make a decision and he says:

"One needn't be much of a psychologist to realise that if this rumor is not stamped out now, in a few years it is capable of diseasing the whole Empire, and one doesn't have to be a prophet to predict to consequences of it should ....

Naturally this cannot be allowed to happen. Civilization must be saved even if this means sending for the military, as I suppose it does. How dreary..... O dear, why couldn't this wretched infant be born somewhere else? Why can't people be sensible? I don't want to be horrid. Why can't they see that the notion of a finite God is absurd? Because it is..... I refuse to be taken in..... I've worked like a slave. I want everyone to be happy. I wish I had never been born." [The Collected Poetry of W. H. Auden, Random House, New York, p.p. 454-460.

As I thought about that this week I couldn't help but be reminded of the ritual of self-justification joined by the military and the people of this nation after My Lai. Apparently children were killed. And lo and behold there spoke among us many who could excuse it. After all - war is hell - the children sometimes are the enemy - it's an unfortunate but necessary method to save the country from Communism. And after all - the other side does it too. Even more tragic than the crime of My Lai, is this casual justification of what happened, this ability to wash our hands of whatever was done.

There is a play by a German writer (Von Schlegel) in which the opening curtain rises to reveal another audience waiting for the curtain to rise. It does - only to reveal another audience, and at this point people get uneasy and begin to look around to see if they too are on stage. The story of Herod - does that to us, if we are honest. For that kind of thing is not confined to the first century. It continues to happen. And the fact that it occurred, in the first context, as a direct result of the birth of Jesus Christ, ought to give us pause. It ought to force us to probe deeply - into our hearts - and into the nature of the life we are living.

The trouble with a lot of religion is that it doesn't do this to us, or for us. I had lunch last week with several other ministers and some members of the Sociology Department at Purdue who are academically concerned with the Sociology of Religion. We talked about why people go to church: why they are motivated to do what our culture defines as the "religious thing to do." We concluded that there are two basic types of churches that are successfully motivating people to be religious: churches that provide all the answers and rigidly structure a man's behavior, and churches that avoid - at all costs - conflict. Churches that minister by helping, providing advice on how to succeed, how to overcome lonliness, how to be a better person. Our conclusions are not unassailable, of course, but it does appear that a type of religiosity which is honest about conflict - in the world, between the Gospel and the world, between the Gospel and individuals, will probably be experiencing a decline in constituency and financial support. That is, people aren't coming to church to have their fur rubbed the wrong way.

And yet the Bible ought to rub our fur the wrong way on occasion, if not regularly. When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, Herod was disturbed, "and the whole city with him". The story of the slaughtered innocents is there, right at the beginning. As a man he got involved in conflicts with all the structures of his culture; he argued with the very best - the religious leaders. The conflict was so bad that he ended up on a cross as a common crimminal.

John R. Fry, pastor of Chicago's First Presbyterian Church, a man who for better or for worse is constantly at the center of a malestrom of controversy knows what conflict means. Very perceptively he writes: "The Bible is a fantastic book..... It has these great stories. A perfectly amazing point of view, once it emerges out of the goo and iron bars and hymns and candles. It is against civilization. Money. Religion. Greed. War. Demons. Disease. Death. Poverty. Propaganda. Injustice. Sin. Lies. Repression. Reader's Digest. The Bible believes in God, in Jesus, in the Holy Spirit, in the Church. The Holy People. Joy. Forgiveness. Love. Life. Justice. Peace. Truth. Passion. Ecstacy. Health. Prosperity. Affluence. Rssurrection" [Fire and Blackstone, J. B. Lippincott]

John Fry has chosen to be the precipitator of a lot on crises in areas where deep-seated conflicts already exist. And one can be critical of his strategy, his methodology, but not of his point. Because there is overwhelming biblical precedent for the Gospel being deeply involved in the world and, in fact, being the direct precipitator of conflict in the world.

But perhaps we waste our words talking about the church as if it were some corporate entity that has nothing to do with me personally; or the world, as if that means everything other than my realm of experience. Perhaps our real problem is that we have refused to see the conflict the Gospel precipitates in ourselves.

Herod saw it clearly in Auden's poem: "And suppose, just for the sake of argument..... that this story is true, that this child is in some inexplicable manner both God and man, that he grows up, lives and dies, without committing a single sin? Would that make life any better? On the contrary it would make it far worse. For it could only mean this; that once having shown them how, God would expect every man, whatever his fortune, to lead a sinless life in the flesh and on earth. Then indeed would the human race be plunged into madness and dispair. and for me personally at this moment it would mean that God had given me the power to destroy himself.... He could not play such a horrible practical joke. Why

should he dislike me so?" Op cite Christmas Oratoria

Well, it is no practical joke, but what God has done in Jesus Christ is not only to introduce something into history that conflicts with a lot of what men do, but also to confront every individual; to confront us, if you will, in a way that lays bare the conflict between our wills, our desires, ourselves - and His will.

Raymond Stramm has said that the task of preaching is "not so much to show a man a way out of his predicament. It is rather to confront him with the radical nature of his predicament." The Gospel ought to comfort the distressed, but before it does this - or rather - in order to do this - it must distress the comfortable. And Paul Scherer (The Word God Sent) writes that "It is quite possible that we never hear the Gospel until we have been made uneasy by it". [p. 75]

You see, the real conflict is within each one of us. And while we may never have to resolve it as dramatically as Herod, it is nonetheless still there. We have heard the Gospel: we know about Jesus Christ: we have learned what he said and did. And through it all we have perceived that God wants nothing from us but everything. He wants our devotion - our obedience. He wants us to acknowledge that we do wrongly, and hurt each other - even when we are trying not to. He wants us to confront the predicament we are in - the demonic force that seems to use us as its instrument - to acknowledge that we are out of harmony with him and with each other - to confess that and to experience our forgiveness.

But that is easier left undone and therein the conflict. It isn't comfortable to know myself on that level. It isn't pleasant to be that honest about my life. It isn't fun to go to church to be told I'm in a predicament from which I cannot extract myself.

And yet that is the Gospel: that is the kind of conflict precipitated by Jesus Christ the man. And its resolution is an intensely personal matter for each one of us. The New Testament calls it salvation, and it means opening myself totally to the redeeming love of God: laying my life on the line, no holds barred, no secrets hidden, no assumptions, prejudices, goals or desires on a hidden agenda.

It means allowing the redeeming love of God to take my life and use it as its instrument.

We don't have altar calls in contempory Presbyterianism - because that quickly becomes a meaningless ritual subject more to social pressure than the urgent call of Christ. And yet I am convinced that we need, everyone of us, to confront, on the deepest possible level, the conflicts that do exist between ourselves and what we affirm religiously. We need an occasional experience of gut-level honesty and a renewed dedication to our Lord. We need to open our eyes to the reality of the conflict between the Gospel and the world, and to throw ourselves into the fray - on the side of Jesus Christ.

Herod chose to deal with the coming of Jesus Christ in a very tragic way. For us the issue remains. If we are honest with ourselves we will no longer call Herod by his name. The child has come to disturb all of us.

Amen.

Our father - disturb us with the truth of the Gospel. Grant us the courage to look honestly at our lives. Grant us the grace to ask forgiveness. Grant us the power of your Holy Spirit to live new lives as obedient disciples. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen